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ABSTRACT

To assess the value of professional writing internships, a pilot study at Michigan State University will administer pre- and post-tests to students involved in internships, as well as to control groups composed of professional writing majors who do not participate in internships, and other English majors following a traditional curriculum of literature study. The instruments will measure attitudinal differences by asking students to respond to questions concerning their outlook toward their major, their abilities within their major, and their belief in their job marketability after graduation. Subjects will be juniors and seniors. It is anticipated that results will show that those students who participate in a formal internship program will leave their internships with greater confidence and increased ability in the practical application of their field of study. Most importantly, it is expected that internships will improve the attitude of English majors in practicing their professional skills. (An Internship Study Response Form is attached.) (RAE)

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THE MISSING LINK: INTERNSHIPS IN PROFSSIONAL WRITING PROGRAMS

Drs. Nancy Deal and John F. Beaver

Introduction

Current reassessments of college curricula address the issue of vocation after graduation: how will our students use the education they receive once they join the work force? Naisbitt, for instance, suggests that today's students will have multiple careers during their work lives (Megatrends, 1982). Traditional liberal arts programs, with emphases on writing, speaking, reading, and analyzing information, should prepare students for a wide variety of professions. Nevertheless, despite some conservative rallying cries from such traditional educators as Bloom (The Closing of the American Mind, 1987) and Hirsch (Cultural Literacy, 1987), the liberal arts now compete for influence with comprehensive pre-professional college programs.

And well they should. Students have a right to ask how their educations prepare them for meaningful work. The growth of "professional writing" programs and courses in English departments represents some attempt to offer new, vocationally-oriented perspectives within traditional curricular frameworks. Courses in technical writing, legal writing, and promotional writing expand classical rhetorical models to address questions of audience and written messages that go beyond established types of expository writing assignments (the argumentative paper, the cause and effect paper, etc.) Even so, such courses and programs, if they stop in the college classroom, remain

theoretical in nature and may not help students believe in the efficacy of their formal educations when they compete in the job market after graduation.

Background of the Study

Observational data collected from over one hundred who participated in an internship program, developed and implemented through the English Department at Michigan State University between 1986-88, suggested that liberal arts students benefit from integrating such "real world" experiences into their academic training. Placements as diverse as advertising agencies, government and legislative offices, university divisions, and non-profit organizations provided students with an opportunity to use their English--reading, writing, analytical, and research skills--in a variety of ways.

Most of the undergraduates (all at the junior or senior level) entered their internships with a feeling that, as they approached graduation, they could not compete successfully in the job market. Most expressed concern about even finding a job, any job. Fear of failing in the first professional job hunt is not peculiar to liberal arts students only. But English majors face the question society reiterates regarding the utility of their schooling: "What are you going to do with <u>that</u>?"

After completing their internships, nearly all of the students who participated in the program felt confident of their abilities and were eager to enter the job market. After using

their skills in professional settings, they discovered that, as writers, they were often able to complete writing assignments more easily and effectively than the practicing professionals for whom they worked. In answer to what they could do with an English major, they were able to respond with a portfolio of projects such as newsletters, brochures, professional correspondence, press releases, public service announcements, television and radio scripts.

Design of the Study

Although the program at Michigan State proved successful in raising students' confidence and job marketability, internship programs are usually an elective option rather than a requirement, even for students with a writing emphasis within their English major. Currently, the English department at Elizabethtown College is reviewing its curriculum to consider internships as a required component for its students enrolled in the Professional Writing program. This paper proposes a set of evaluation instruments to assess internship experiences to provide a strong argument for an internship requirement.

The design of this pilot study is to administer pre- and post-tests to students involved in internships as well as to control groups composed of professional writing majors who do not participate in internships and other English majors following a traditional curriculum of literature study, also without internships. The instruments aim to measure attitudinal

differences by asking students to respond to questions concerning their outlook toward their major, their abilities within their major. and their belief in their job marketability after graduation.

The pre- and posttests are similar to achieve a valid comparison of responses. To compare classroom and real-world experiences, the tests ask students to respond to their readiness to practice as professionals after completing academic writing courses as well as to their concerns for future employment.

Procedures for the Study

Each intern will be asked to complete the one-hour pre- and post-test in a controlled situation during a scheduled appointment. In addition, the participants must submit a 150-word biography describing their academic and professional backgrounds. They are also asked to complete a 30-minute extemporaneous writing sample after they respond to each survey. The writing situation asks them to create a brief piece of business correspondance generic to their internships. The two samples will be assessed by the English department chair and the two faculty members who staff the professional writing courses, and one intern supervisor to assess the development of the students after they complete their internships. The samples will be submitted by a coded number, replacing names, so as not to influence the response of the readers.

The members of the two control groups will complete the same

questionnaire, modelled closely to the pre-test taken by the interns. They, too, will be asked to produce an extemporaneous writing sample. Each subject in the control group will complete the survey and piece of writing, under the same controlled conditions, during a one-hour appointment. The control groups will be selected to match, as closely as possible, the backgrounds of the intern. Criteria for selection will include class standing, number of English courses taken, writing ability, and previous writing experiences.

Limitations of the Study

Because the internship program is in the process of development, the limited number of participants creates a small sample from which to draw data. However, by implementing the pilot study, we hope to improve the research during the 1989-90 academic year, using a greater number of students to act as participants.

Perhaps the most difficult area of the study will be the assessment of the student writing samples. By involving the supervisor in reading the interns' products, and by maintaining the students' anonymity, we hope to establish an environment for an impartial evaluation.

After reviewing the success of the pilot, we hope to implement the study in an expanded form. Projections to expand the study include a longitudinal case study follow-up over a longer time period to assess students' abilities to write for a

variety of public audiences, shift voice and style for a variety of writing assignments, and promote themselves effectively and confidently once they enter the job market.

Anticipated Results

We expect to find that those students who participate in a formal internship program will leave their internships with greater confidence and increased ability in the practical application of their field of study. Most important, we expect to find that internships improve the attitude of English majors in practicing their professional skills. Although competency, proficiency, and mastery of subject matter are keys for success in both one's school and work life, an expectation for success seems crucial to master a profession. Increased confidence as a beginning professional is an essential component to enter and succeed in the work force.

This study could communicate important messages to those involved in liberal arts curricula--students and educators alike. If the observational data proves representative, the study would argue strongly for incorporating vocational components into the writing curriculum. It would also extend the practice of reader-based writing that currently forms an important part of the pedagogical approach of many college writing programs. Most critically, the study would address the question that a student may legitimately pose to any curriculum or program: How does it prepare me for the future?

INTERNSHIP STUDY RESPONSE FORM

Please answer the following questions as completely as possible. For multiple choice questions, choose the answer(s) that most closely resemble(s) your attitude, opinion, or situation. The results will be used in a research project investigating the value of internships in Professional Writing programs.

1. What is your class standing?

   Sophomore_____

   Junior____

   Senior_____

2. What is your grade point average, approximately?

   2.0 - 2.5 _____ 3.0 - 3.5 _____

   2.5 - 3.0 _____ 3.5 - 4.0 _____

3. What is your grade point average within your major, approximately?

   2.0 - 2.5 _____ 3.0 - 3.5 _____

   2.5 - 3.0 _____ 3.5 - 4.0 _____

4. How many credits are you carrying this semester? _____

5. List the English courses you are taking this semester.

   (a)_____

   (b)_____

   (c)_____

   (d)_____

6. Which of the professional writing courses have you taken at Elizabethtown College? Circle the appropriate responses.

(a) Introduction to Professional Writing, EN 185

(b) Writing for Science and Technology, EN 285A

(c) Writing in the Health Profession, EN 285B

(d) Writing in the Social Sciences, EN 285C

(e) Writing for Government and the Judiciary, EN 285D

(f) Technical Writing, EN 382

(g) Advanced Composition and Editing, EN 384

(h) Writing for Publication, EN 385

(i) Senior Writing Seminar, EN 393

7. In the above courses, which of the following elements of writing were you taught?

(a) audience awareness

(b) planning of messages

(c) editing

(d) working collaboratively in writing groups

(e) revising

(f) other _____

8. Which of the following types of writing did you address in these courses?

(a) business correspondence

(b) promotional/public relations writing

(c) resumes and job application letters

(d) memoranda

(e) reports

(f) other _____

9. Rate your present proficiency as a writer in each of the following areas. Circle the appropriate number.

(a) Increase awareness of public audiences

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(b) Refine your writing style

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(c) Write for a variety of purposes

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(d) Establish a professional image

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(e) Learn writing that takes place in non-academic organizations

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

10. Why did you choose to become an English major?

(a) to develop as a writer

(b) to study literature

(c) to prepare for a profession

(d) other _____

11. What is you concentration as an English major?

(a) literature study

(b) professional writing

(c) English education

(d) other _____

12. Rate the marketability of your English skills for each of the following elements.

(a) Provides a broad background

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(b) Gives you strong writing skills

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(c) Develops your analytical abilities

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(d) Develops your research capabilities

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(e) Other _____

0 1 2 3 4 5

13. Rate the extent to which your marketability may be hindered by your English major.

(a) Fails to prepare you for a specific job or career

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(b) Fails to provide "real-world" experiences

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(c) Lacks specific content

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(d) Fails to address employment skills

0 1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Great deal

(e) Other _____

0 1 2 3 4 5

14. What are the questions you are asked most often asked about your major?

15. Please include any other information about yourself which may be pertinent to your educational and professional growth.